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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NIAMEY 000605

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL PGOV EAGR EAID NG

SUBJECT: (C) NIGER: TESTY FOREIGN MINISTER (FM) MEETS WITH DIPLOMATIC CORPS; UN OFFICIAL SAYS ONLY ONE SECURITY CONFERENCE PLANNED FOR SAHEL REGION

REF: A. 07 NIAMEY 1418

¶B. NIAMEY 559 AND 546

¶C. NIAMEY 81

Classified By: AMBASSADOR BERNADETTE M. ALLEN, REASONS: 1.4 b/d

¶11. (U) Summary. Responding to a diplomatic corps request of several weeks ago for an update on the security situation in the north, the status of 2009 election preparations and a review of food security issues, Government of Niger (GON) FM Aichatou Mindaoudou convoked the resident ambassadors and representatives of international institutions accredited to Niger to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for a June 10 closed-door meeting. Most of the FM's remarks on security were a rehash of statements made last November (reftel); that is, travel in the north (aka Agadez region) is safe except for a small area around the Air Mountains. She reported that preparations for the 2009 elections remain on track. She stated that more donor support is needed for irrigation projects to permit an increase in production of basic staples, especially rice, and to improve food security in the Sahel region. End summary.

¶12. (C) Initial questions centered around security in northern Niger and two regional security conferences, reportedly to be hosted by Mali and Niger, respectively. FM Mindaoudou insisted there is no problem traveling in the north, that for the most part people in Agadez manage their daily affairs without incident. After a foreign assistance cooperation representative mentioned difficulty his organization is having delivering goods to vulnerable communities in the north (given vehicle hijackings, landmines, etc.), Mindaoudou acknowledged the embassies', international institutions' and non-governmental organizations' (NGOs) right to scale back activities or travel in the north, but at the same time questioned the reasoning behind such decisions. She said that as far as she is concerned it is safe to operate in the north, that she'd be willing to go with the diplomatic corps to Agadez at anytime. (Note: The week of June 2, 2008, the Ministry of Interior circulated a notice to NGO representatives in Zinder, an adjacent region south of Agadez, requiring that NGOs pay for security escort to travel from Tanout (location of two kidnappings per ref B and C) northward to Agadez. The notice cited hijackings of five vehicles in the past month as justification for the requirement. End note.)

¶13. (C) As for the venue, date and who may be invited to participate in the security conferences, Mindaoudou replied that she lacked details on the proposed conferences because they fall under the jurisdiction of the Minister of Interior. Nevertheless, she said there has been discussion of a "Conference of West Africa" in Mali before the end of June as

a preparatory session for a second Sahel conference to be hosted by Niger at a date to be determined and to include six Heads of State (Mali, Niger, Algeria, Libya, Mauritania and Chad) to discuss smuggling, banditry and counterterrorism . (Note: United Nations Office of West Africa (UNOWA) Special Representative of the Secretary General, Said Djinnit, in Niamey (June 11-13) to discuss security issues with GON President Tandja and other GON officials, visited USEmbassy Niamey on June 11 to ask for the Ambassador's assessment of matters in northern Niger. In that meeting Djinnit reported that he understood there would only be one conference for seven countries (with Burkina Faso as an addition to the six countries named by Mindaoudou), to be hosted by the Government of Mali, at a date to be determined in July because of the number of meetings on the continent already calendared through the end of June (e.g., CENSAD, ECOWAS, Niger River Basin Authority). He said the United Nations has not been invited to participate in the Mali conference and that he was informed that no other countries or institutions outside the region would be invited, that this would be a "neighborhood" event. End note).

¶4. (C) Mindaoudou took offense at the mention of "Tuareg issues", adamantly stated that there is no political nor "Tuareg issue" in the north, that the real problem is security, notably banditry and smuggling (arms, drugs). She added that the GON only lacks means to protect the entire span of the country from growing criminal activity. On a question related to negotiations with MNJ, the FM reiterated the GON position that it cannot accept negotiations with criminals. She emphasized that in a democracy bearing arms is not the manner by which one pursues one's demands. She

NIAMEY 00000605 002 OF 002

added that if bearing arms is the correct way to pursue one's demands, then women in Niger should do so to demand their rights (Comment: A remark she has made in the past. End comment.). Turning to the discussion of the 1995 Peace Accords, Mindaoudou stated that 90 percent of the former rebels' demands have been delivered, that there only remains the issue of about 200 jobs that Areva (French uranium firm) was unable to offer due to the rebels' lack of expertise. Reiterating a comment she's made in the past, she remarked that thousands of diplomaed youth around the country remain unemployed and aren't taking up arms to demand jobs. She questioned the amount of attention given to the approximately 200 persons not hired by Areva. She then ranted about nationals in some countries who are leading protest marches on behalf of Tuaregs and complained about false information in the press concerning the plight of Tuaregs. (Comment: These presumably are references to nationals in France and the United States. End comment.)

¶5. (C) An international financial institution representative asked for clearer guidance on what partners should do to address the GON funding shortfall for the 2009 elections. Mindaoudou questioned why it was news that the GON would need funding support for elections. She said governments and institutions already should have prepared for this, since it has been common knowledge since 2004 that the next legislative and Presidential elections in Niger were scheduled for 2009. There was acknowledgment that the elections were not news, but it was pointed out that the GON decision to conduct a new voter registration campaign and the funding requirements for the campaign had not been anticipated. Mindaoudou recognized that as a valid point and said she'd raise the matter with the President. She opined that she didn't want elections in Niger to turn out like elections in some other countries on the continent, such as Kenya and Zimbabwe. Further, she stated older, democratic nation partners need to recognize that newer democracies in Africa are not cut from the same mold as older democracies, that officials who have been accredited to Niger for more than a year and know the local situation should be able to explain such matters to their governments.

¶6. (U) On food security, Mindaoudou urged partners to support more funding for irrigation projects, to decrease Sahel region reliance on food imports. She said Niger has lots of untapped water underground, that countries like Mali can produce more rice with the right support. She mentioned a possible regional meeting on rice to take place in Mali at a date to be determined. She added that Niger was working on its need assessment, given its place as one of 19 countries on the food assistance priority list.

¶7. (U) The meeting closed on a lighter note with a question about the African development conference held in Tokyo. Mindaoudou reported that the primary areas of discussion at the conference were climate change, food security and the UN Millennium Development Goals, but she provided no specific details.

(C) (Comment: Attendees left the session baffled about the FM's demeanor and without clarity on several issues. End comment.)

ALLEN